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Research to develop Spiritual Pedagogy, Awareness and Change

Abstract

A co-operative inquiry group consisting of 8 counsellors met for 11 months to explore their experience of spirituality in their counselling training and in their work with clients (**Swinton, 2010; 2015**). The aim was to explore whether spirituality was absent from the process of counselling training, specifically to discover (1) how counsellors perceived and described their experience of spirituality in their training and (2) **with a view to developing spiritual pedagogy; how spirituality could be incorporated into the training process of practitioners.**

The research was based on the Human Inquiry paradigm which enabled learning and awareness about spirituality to become grounded in practical experience where participants could consider the implications of new ideas for their own lives and how this might impact on their practice (Reason and Bradbury 2001).

From these groups although four main themes were identified, what is being considered in this paper is how the inquiry group process proved to be a useful vehicle for transformative learning and a dynamic means for individuals to engage with the topic in counselling training.

Keywords

Counselling; Training; Spirituality; Co-operative inquiry

Background

Including Spirituality in the Training Process

The call for the inclusion of spirituality in counselling training is growing with writers and researchers highlighting the importance that spirituality play in the life of clients in diverse populations, such as the US and the UK (Sperry & Shafranske 2005; Bartoli, 2007; Delaney, Miller, & Bisoño 2007). The assumption is that spirituality is absent from the training process and should be an element in the training of counsellors and those working in the caring profession.

The thrust of the research in this area is on incorporating religious and spiritual variables in practitioner education (Kelly Jr., 1994); or the need for practitioners to develop competencies to work with religious and spiritual issues in counselling (Pate Jr. & High, 1995); highlighting the benefits to clients. The conclusion from most research in this area highlights the fact that despite the importance of religion/spirituality in most clients' lives, practitioners are not given adequate training to prepare them to deal with issues arising in these realms (Delaney, et al., 2007; Shafranske & Malony, 1990). Surveys have shown that professionals reported addressing religious and spiritual issues in their clinical practice yet these issues were rarely or never addressed in the course of their training (Delaney, et al., 2007; Lannert, 1991; Prest, Russel, & D'Souza, 1999; Shafranske & Malony, 1990). Although there is increased interest in spirituality, Brawer et al (2002) assert that the development in the training of psychologists has not kept pace with this interest. Religion might be recognised as part of diversity but whether psychologists were receiving adequate training in this area was difficult to ascertain.

The conclusion of researchers was the need to develop curricular and training guidelines in this area as there was little evidence of what is being taught on training courses (Young, Wiggins-Frame, & Cashwell, 2007). In addition, practitioners reported difficulties and confusion on how to work with spiritual issues in therapy. The difficulties were particularly acute when these beliefs appeared to undermine the person's wellbeing (Jackson, 2009).

Method

The approach utilised for the study was the human or co-operative inquiry work of Heron and Reason (Reason, 1988; Reason and Bradbury 2001) working through a number of cycles to gain understanding of the participants' experience of spirituality (see Figure 1). The research drew on the heuristic process of Moustakas (1990) with its roots in the phenomenological paradigm where the focus is on understanding the meaning of events to individuals (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The method was also underpinned by my personal model of working in the Person Centred Perspective (Rogers, 1957), which is also rooted in the phenomenological paradigm.

Co-operative inquiry does research *with* people, not *on*, *to*, or *about* them. The research procedures remove the boundaries between researcher and subject by engaging all participants as co-researchers and co-subjects. This forum enabled learning and awareness about spirituality to become grounded in practical experience where participants could consider the implications of new ideas for their own lives and how this might impact on their practice. In this way there was a disclosing of the world as it was experienced by the researchers 'a creative rather than scientific effort' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xx). **(This is the actual page number)**

It was not just a question of gaining understanding, but how to present outcomes that flowed from transformative action research. McLeod (1999) says collective approaches to research have been **developed, with the idea that a group of people working together on a research study can produce more creative findings; when** it is a group of practitioners then the findings can be applied to practice (McLeod 1999).

In devising the research I was greatly impacted by Reason's (1988) description of cooperative inquiry as a way that all involved in the enquiry contribute to the creation and the action of the research. The author postulates that cooperative inquiry is a form of education, personal development and social action. The educative element was of interest in relation to how spirituality could be explored in training and how

this learning experience could be created in the research process. There was some overlap with traditional research in that I had initiated the research and chosen the topic to be researched. This could have inhibited the true sense of co-operative enquiry – working together as co-researchers and co-subjects. The inquiry is viewed as something that will have a transforming element on those involved in the research.

Co-researchers

My ideal co-researchers were volunteers drawn from those who had an interest in spirituality, those who felt that they were anti-spirituality/religion, individuals who may profess a Christian or Muslim faith, or with none of these criteria, but who would be willing to be part of the research experience. In the end I had to settle for those who demonstrated an interest and able to commit to 6 cycles and the evaluation session. Initially there were 15 responses to the information from the various places that I had sent the invitation. In the end 9 people actually confirmed their interest with 8 turning up for the first session that was held at the University where I worked (2 of these respondents had taken part in the pilot study). Of those 9 one person did not return after the first session because of changes in her work pattern and another of the co-researchers only managed to attend a couple of the cycles. The co-researchers were practitioners who had completed training on a course that did not have spirituality as an explicit dimension in the curriculum:

‘Anna’ is a White British, middle aged, female whose family of origin did have religious/spiritual affiliations. She said that these were still important to her and that her religious/spiritual affiliations were now, Christian/mystical.

‘Cilla’ is also a White, middle aged, British female whose family of origin did have religious\spiritual affiliations that were still important to her.

‘Ella’ is also a White, middle aged British female, who was christened in the Church of England, even though her family was not practicing Christians.

‘Jeanne’ is also a White, middle aged British female, who became a Roman Catholic when she was 21. Her family of origin was interested in spirituality ‘but had no love for organised religion’.

‘Kenneth is a White, middle age British male, born and brought up as a Roman Catholic understanding the breadth and depth of spiritual possibilities.

'Martin' is also male, White and British, with no religious or spiritual affiliations, even though his family of origin did have religious/spiritual affiliations.

'Sandra' classes herself as a born again Christian and said that her family of origin did have religious/spiritual affiliations. She is White, British and middle aged.

'Sheryl' says she occasionally attends a Church, is interested in religion and spirituality, as well as meditation. She is also White, middle aged and British. Her family of origin had no spiritual/religious affiliations.

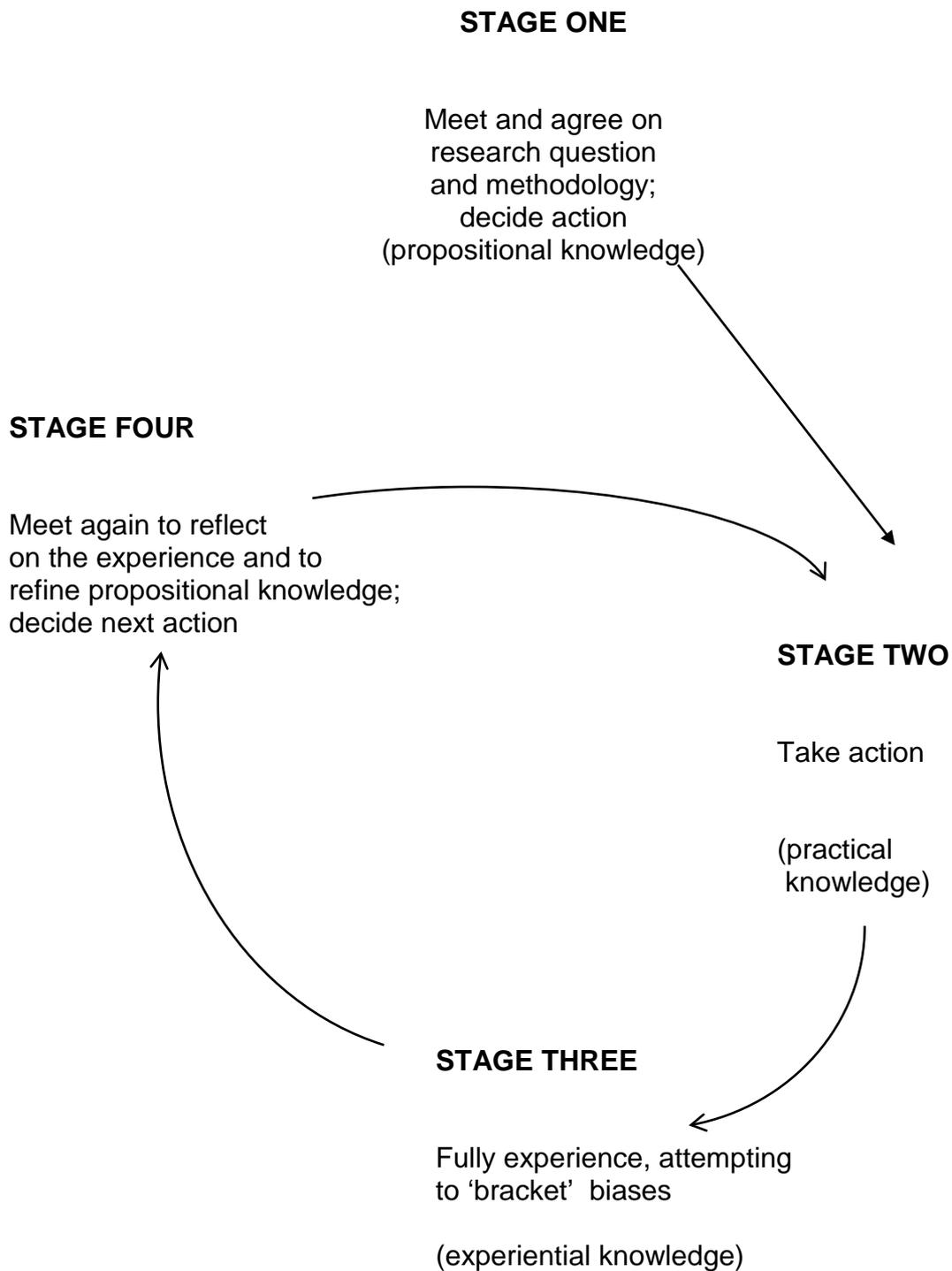
The discussion was based around the following semi-structured questions: -

- a. What was their understanding of spirituality?
- b. How spirituality differs from religion?
- c. How did they experience what they were describing in their training?
- d. If this phenomenon had not been experienced, how would they have liked it to be? And
- e. Had they worked with this dimension and did they feel prepared to do so?

Data collection and analysis

There were six inquiry groups or 'cycles' with a final evaluation session four months later. The first stage of the process was the initial getting together where the group decided on how we would proceed. This initial meeting enabled introductions, clarification of the process of the group, what people needed in relation to confidentiality, safety, the way the group would function, expectations and the broad topic to be explored. The discussion was tape recorded and then transcribed; the results were then analyzed using a thematic analysis. **Figure 1 is the cycle outlined from West (1996):**

Figure 1 – Inquiry Group Stages



(West 1996, p.347)

The thematic analysis of the data was based on the work of Glaser and Strauss (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The themes were arrived at using the inductive rather than a deductive method from the method developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I printed the sheets of data to begin the process of identifying meaning units from the words and actions of the co-researchers. These experiences made up the stories that the co-researchers brought to each session of the research cycle. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) say that the defining characteristic of qualitative research is the inductive approach to data analysis. This constant comparative method enabled themes to be developed from the data itself.

Units of meanings were sometimes a sentence, other times a paragraph and these were bracketed off on the page. This all depended on the length of the story that the co-researcher related. The themes were then developed and redeveloped and then sent out to the co-researchers before the next session of the inquiry group. This was an onerous task as the groups were four to six weeks apart. The co-researchers were involved in this process with the themes being sent back to them before the next session (cycle) to elicit comments and to check the accuracy of the themes that emerged from the previous session. This allowed for member checks giving the opportunity to comment on the analyzed data and their feedback.

At the end of the research process I began to engage with all the material from the sessions with aim of developing the initial themes, **not just from the individual sessions but how the themes had emerged over the research cycle**. It appeared like a daunting task to manage working through all seven transcripts cutting and pasting the information into the themes that had emerged from each session. In this process, there was comparison of units of meaning across the categories followed by a refinement of categories, exploration of relationships and patterns across the categories and finally an integration of data to develop my understanding of the focus of the inquiry groups (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Ethical Consideration

The proposed doctoral research study received ethical approval from the university and was additionally informed by BACP guidelines on research in Counselling and psychotherapy (Bond, 2004), and the Ethical framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy (Bond 2002). The BACP has outlined in its Ethical guidelines for researching counselling and psychotherapy its 'aims to promote and inform good research practice' (Bond, 2004, p. 4). It outlines the need for the trustworthiness and integrity of the researcher in relation to their participants; the communication of new discovery and the impact on practice. These guidelines are linked to the Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy (Bond, 2002).

RESULTS

Figure 2 - Themes on Spirituality in the Training Process

1	Training	1.1	Spirituality in training process
		1.2	Risks/Self Disclosure
2	Inquiry Group	2	Experience of the Inquiry group

Training

1.1. Spirituality in the training process

In relation to explicitly experiencing spirituality in the context of counselling training this was not the experience of most of the group. For one co-researcher, the nature of counselling which involves exploring our inner world, as well as engaging with those who are doing the same meant that spirituality was involved in this process, all be it implicitly. A suggestion was made by another co-researcher that there were fears associated with using the word spirituality and the fear was more to do with acknowledgement rather than the fact that spirituality was absent from the process:

'... people have been afraid to use the word. I think there's been more of a fear of acknowledging its presence rather than it being absent.' There was not just fear but *'...the avoidance, mustn't really show or not mention **the word**' (Cilla).* Cilla felt very strongly expressing her sense of it being an integral part of the process of counselling.

For Sheryl it was *"spelled out, but I ... well, maybe it was because ... to me it was always present."* Yet for Ella it came as a shock when it was actually explicitly named: *"I think for me it was quite ... a shock to have it spelled out as ... to have it labelled as 'spiritual' and I can remember when this happened and it was ... when I was in training."* Ella's feelings were acknowledged with the idea of the integral nature of spirituality within the counselling process. There was also acknowledgement of the impact that it would have had on her, if it had been made explicit in the course content:

*“I think it's integral, so ... you can't separate it out, but I think there needs to be awareness and recognition and an exploration in training. But, yes, I understand what you mean, if you were looking at course content and you saw that, that would have caused you to **back off**” (Cilla).*

It was acknowledged that for some individuals, making spirituality explicit in counselling training might have a detrimental effect and cause them to be put off. However, in expressing her sense of being put off if spirituality had been explicit in the process Ella did explain what it was like when spirituality came into focus for her:

“I think it happens. ... it kind of creeps up on you. Well, in my case, it crept up on me and when I was confronted with the label, I then had to step back and look at it and think about it and ... come to some adjustment in my own way of understanding things. So that begs the question really, as to how specific does it have to be therefore ... for me it was an inherent part of the process. I just struggled with the label. But it was inherent ... any process that sends you looking inwards, you're going to come across far more questions than answers, or I did. And ... yeah, ... it's complex.”

There was agreement in the group that spirituality was part of the process. It may not have been called spirituality but it was an integral part of the process of counselling.

1.2 Training - Risks/Self Disclosure

As Schreurs, (2002, p. 28) aptly states **“People tend to be sensitive about expressing religious feelings outside their trusted circle.”** There were a number of ways that this sensitivity or fears were expressed in the group whether it was in relation to the spiritual journey and the changes that might ensue or in talking about spiritual experiences that the speaker might be seen as a ‘weirdo’. It was interesting that in the group a number of disclosures were prefaced with ‘I don’t want to appear strange’ or ‘be seen as a weirdo’ or ‘to appear stupid’.

“...and maybe I'm going to be like a right weirdo now but ... when I was a kid, when I was little ... kind of just acquiring language and just beginning to learn to describe my experiences, I used to say that if I felt ill that I felt pale” (Ella).

*“It's a spirituality that quite frightens me, I think. I think I need to say that. It does frighten me. ... Because it ... it wrong foots me. Don't know what to do. Don't understand it. Don't see it. Don't it's not ... it's not my world really. I don't **think**”* (Ella).

“I'm a bit wary of saying something actually ... because ... I don't like sounding stupid and I feel I might sound stupid at the minute” (Ella).

*“You know? For me there's something, and that's why probably in a different way I've shied away because some of the things I can feel ... **it's scary**”* (Ella).

It took one co- researcher some time before she felt able to reveal an experience that she had in the counselling room. It took courage to reveal her experience once others had begun to disclose those experiences that may make them appear 'weird' in some way. The difficulty that she encountered was that she did not know how to handle this situation within a counselling context when working with a client. Although her mother was a Spiritualist, she had different beliefs and therefore was not very comfortable in knowing how to handle clients with similar beliefs. Sandra had worried about having to deal with a client who was involved in spiritualism like her mother. She had brought her worries to supervision and felt prepared but still felt woefully unprepared for what she encountered with a grieving client who had been to see a medium following the death of a love one:

“I think it's interesting for me where you started talking about this because I actually wrote something on this form, which I felt I couldn't share. I can remember thinking about how would I be if I found myself in a situation ... and I did find myself in that situation their (client) experience in going to a medium So as she's telling me this, I thought: ooh, this is interesting but? ... , because, I haven't had any training, there's no sort of training,

how you would deal with this, is there? So anyway I was sitting listening ... and then there was a presence actually in the room in the shape of an animal. Which I thought was ... ! So I'm sitting there and knew that I couldn't ... I knew that I couldn't say ... well, I didn't know, but I felt I couldn't say what I could see” (Sandra).

2. Training - Inquiry group Experience

This kind of forum seemed to be a way that spirituality could be explored. There was opportunity to explore some of what the group felt were the benefits of being part of the inquiry group forum. The Inquiry Group itself became a place to experience our sense of the spiritual by what we brought to the experience and to hear the stories of the other co-researchers. The group became a safe place to share stories and to hear stories that it may not have been possible to tell in another place. This kind of forum seemed to be a way that spirituality could be explored:

“I have something very powerfully with me at the moment but ... but I'm aware that it's ... for me, anyway, powerful and I haven't ... it's ... it's ... very fresh, so I'm ... I suppose, sitting here, holding it and ... and knowing that I would be here ... assuming I would be here tonight and very much wanting to be here with this, but at the same time acknowledging ... the ... the enormity of it, maybe for the group” (Anna).

“And I kind of felt as you were talking, I felt I had to really sit still. I don't know, there was something in me, I felt ... I had to sit still while you were talking, not to disturb.....” (Sandra).

The co-researchers articulated the dynamic nature of the inquiry group process:

“Well, I think ...what we've done in this group is ... in a way, could be a model, couldn't it, for ... how you do it really, because it sort of ... it seem ... we didn't have ... or we knew the broad topic, but we ... each time we've met things have just evolved, haven't they, from people's personal experience, experience with clients or ... or just their own personal experience” (Cilla).

“...but I think addressing it ... in a forum such as this where you can dip your toes in gradually and gain ... confidence and feel safe within other people's explorations of their experience of it, I would have been fine with that, I think”
(Ella).

“I'm more comfortable with it now and ... I've really enjoyed being here and having this forum and hearing everyone's experiences..... I think I feel more relaxed from having come here and looked at ... the term, if you like, 'spirituality', so that when I am ... have been working, I feel more relaxed, does that makes sense? I don't feel so ... relaxed in a sense ... that I'm not ignoring those ... I suppose I use the word 'anonomies' (sic), is that right? That sort of happens, if you like, in the room? Like you talk about change of air or ... the essence ... it's probably helped me to explore it more ... without perhaps us getting freaked out about it. So I think it's broadened my window... more accepting about my own thoughts, faith”
(Sandra).

“it's a safe place to sit and talk and hear what people have got to say, (Yeah.) and just ... by hearing what people have got to say, opens up a window, doesn't it. Yes, I suppose the validation almost if you like, of ... that's maybe not even the right word, but of the feeling ... Part of me keeps thinking: well, you know, you've got to get on ... on with it because this happens to so many people”
(Sandra).

“Well, I'm glad of that! (laughs) I am glad of that if that's the effect that, you know, of sharing that experience and what I did if you look at it...”
(Cilla).

Discussion

In relation to explicitly experiencing spirituality in the context of counselling training this was not the experience of most of the group. This supports the literature about incorporating religious and spiritual variables in the training of practitioners (Allman, et al., 1992; Aten & Worthington Jr., 2009; Brawer, et al., 2002; Briggs & Rayle, 2005; Hage, et al., 2006; Shafranske & Malony, 1990; Young, et al., 2007). The discussion explored the way that the spiritual was either part of the process or could not be excluded from the whole endeavour of counselling. One reason was that we did not know who our clients will be so the ground needed to be prepared beforehand: as the spiritual realities were encountered.

Fear of ridicule was one reason for concealment of spiritual experience Narayanasamy (2002) found in his study. Although initially shy, with encouragement, the participants were able to reveal their experiences. The participants in the inquiry group were also afraid of being seen as stupid or mentally unbalanced. This begs the question, if something similar might be happening for other therapists? Narayanasamy (2002) found that once fears were assuaged and participants felt listened to they were keen and articulate in relating their stories similar to the inquiry group.

Reason (1994) **implies that in Western society we are** encouraged to separate knower from known and parts from the whole. He goes on to say that all these separations on which Western epistemology is built are linked to the emphasis that is placed on intellectual knowing and the power of 'conceptual knowledge'. The result of this is a separation of intellect from experience and the knowledge that is valued is propositional knowledge. This knowledge is valued more highly than intuitive, practical, affective or spiritual ways of knowing. Hence we have separation rather than a holistic way of viewing our experience and our world, leading to the distorted way of viewing our sense of the spiritual and our connection to the world.

Co-operative inquiry extend this epistemology to include at least three kinds of knowledge: (a) experiential – gained from direct encounter; (b) practical - gained through practice and (c) propositional – knowledge about something that is

expressed in statements and theories. The notion of presentational knowledge is also an important one for this research journey as the co-researchers ordered their tacit knowledge to present in the group process through their stories. The group members closely identified with their experience and told rich stories as they critically reflected on their experience. These stories had resonance that drew on metaphor that evoked a response from the other co-researchers (Reason, 1994).

The practical knowing stage of the inquiry group is seen as where transformational knowledge is gained for doing appropriate things in relation to one's practice. The inquiry as action research where learning takes place and knowledge is gained was integral to the evaluation session of the research. It became, as well, a place to experience our sense of the spiritual by what we brought to the experience and to hear the stories of the other co-researchers. The group became a safe place to share stories and to hear stories that it may not have been possible to tell in another place. It was evident that cooperative inquiry as a form of education, personal development and social action was taking place (Reason 1988).

Not only was this a good pedagogic environment that enabled relaxation, it was a place where the quality of the air changed, where exploration could take place without 'getting freaked out about it' (Sandra) and also where views could be broadened and acceptance found. Listening to the stories of others enabled validation that spirituality is a common human phenomenon.

West (1996; 2000) discussed using a human inquiry group to engage in dialogue about what is meant by 'healing'. He referred to an emergent understanding that what was being offered by members to clients was a 'spiritual space' (p.70). In this research a spiritual space was offered to participants; this 'space' allows for 'the spiritual unfolding' that is already at work in individuals. West cites Reason and Rowan's (1981) idea that empowerment in relation to the research topic is expected to result from the co-operative and participatory nature of this kind of research (West, 1996). Transformational knowledge is also an important outcome of the participation in this research process. This group process appears to be a model for how spirituality could be incorporated into the training process where a 'spiritual space' could be created for the necessary learning and development to take place.

The inquiry group then seems to be a valid way of researching this lived experience that is resistant to a unified definition and could form the basis of a model for this purpose. In addition, the group was a safe space to sharpen one's awareness and develop confidence and enhance our ideas. This is the connected space where the personal and professional are intertwined through the avenue of experiential learning providing opportunity for exploration and integration. This fits with the idea of exploring spirituality in a relational way, as it might be said that, at the core of all spiritualities is relational experiences (Carlson, et al., 2002) with the divine, with other people and with our environment.

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